Faith Presbyterian Church
Sun City, Arizona

February 10, 2013

1 Corinthians 1: 1-4, 10-17

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday dear Faith Presbyterian Church
Happy birthday to you.

It's your fortieth, not very old in the context of the people of God, but a milestone, nevertheless . You are as old as your community. So – Happy Birthday to you here this morning. And happy birthday to all those who came before you; the ones who organized this church, who nurtured it through infancy, taught it how to talk and then run and play – your own community of saints who we believe, in one of our most precious beliefs, are still very much a part of this enterprise, this church, this congregation of God's people in this place.

Your fortieth. It set me to thinking about mine. I was away for my 40th – attending a meeting on . We became snowed in. The airport was closed so I spent my 40th in a school cafeteria and dorm room. But when I came home, a 12-year-old son came up with a creative idea and catchy phrase and persuaded my wife who, in turn, persuaded my administrative assistant and the custodian, and when I drove by the church sign on the main thoroughfare of Columbus, Ohio, there in bold letters on the outdoor church bulletin board was this – "Lordy, Lordy, John is forty!"

So I've always been fond of 40th birthdays. I was away this year as well, for a milestone birthday two weeks ago. That son and his wife and their three impossibly cute little girls were in our condo to greet me with "Surprise: Happy Birthday, Granddaddy!" with special cupcakes and one candle – I'm old enough now that the proper number of candles would constitute a fire hazard and set off the alarms in our building.

So, I love birthdays. And I love being with you to help you celebrate your fortieth. And I assume that you have and will celebrate appropriately with parties and good memories and much laughter and some tears.

And I propose that the best thing you and I can do with our time this Lord's Day is think a bit about this phenomenon we call church, think about what an unusual phenomenon it is, what a peculiar, wonderful theory it can be. And I propose that we do that by remembering the person responsible for the whole deal, a first century Jew by the name of Paul.

But first: a very pleasant vignette. Going to church is good for your health. A professor of Psychology at the University of Iowa, Susan Lutgendorf, conducted an extensive, statistical study and discovered that church attendance has a lot to do with being healthy. Her findings were published in an academic journal, Health & Psychology. People who go to church are healthier and live longer on average than the population at large. Apparently, there is something about getting up and out of the house and joining a group of relatively like-minded people that is good for your health.

When he read that, distinguished historian Martin Marty, now in his 80s, said that he was going to spend as much time in a church pew as he could.

So let's think about the wonderful, sometimes exasperating, heroic, sometimes cowardly, profound, sometimes trivial, holy but also utterly human institution called church.

Some of you, no doubt, have visited the excavated ruins of the ancient Greek port city of Corinth. Corinth was an important commercial city, with ships brining goods from all over the world and with a steady stream of hungry and thirsty sailors looking for some action while their ships were being loaded and reprovisioned. There was a famous Greek temple in Corinth with one thousand sacred prostitutes. When you visit you can walk on the excavated streets and see the worn grooves of wagon wheels. You can see the ancient foundation of shops where spices and candles and food and clothing were bought and sold. You can see the site of the Synagogue and the building next door where the Christians met when they wore out their welcome in the Synagogue. And you can see the Bema, the place in the market where speakers and orators presented their ideas – a sort of open-air newspaper editorial page or television talk show.

Paul, a Jewish convert to Christianity a few years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, had been a persecutor of the early believers. But after his conversion on the Damascus Road became the first and, in many ways, most successful Christian missionary. He travelled throughout the Roman Empire, telling the story of Jesus, how Jesus was God's son, God's revelations and how to know him and believe in him was to become a new person. Wherever Paul went and preached people believed and then gathered into a small, new community. They went about their lives for the most part, but in the Jewish Sabbath and then on the first day of the week, Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead, they came together in someone's home, and they read Hebrew scriptures, and sometimes a letter that Paul had written, and they prayed and ate together, always remembering, as Paul instructed them to do, how Jesus broke bread and poured out the cup and said, "This is my body: this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

When the authorities began to come concerned about their gatherings, they met secretly. They depended on one another, literally. They began to take

care of needy members of the community, particularly widows and orphans and the poor. They made sure everyone was alright, that nobody was hungry or homeless.

We know about these little communities because Paul wrote letters and Christians have kept them lovingly for 2,000 years. then Paul started to call the communities “ecclesia” – the Greek word meaning “called out” – we translate it “church.”

It was to the church in Corinth that Paul wrote: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christi Jesus – Grace to you and peace from our God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you.”

Paul understands what a remarkable thing the church is, how unlikely: a little group of men and women and children whose belief in Jesus was all they had in common, in a big, bustling city that for the most part didn’t even know they were there, them united, a few years later, the authorities began to see them as a threat, and then the terrible persecution began. But now, Paul knows how remarkable it is that they exist, this little “ecclesia,” this church and churches in Ephesus and Thessalonica and throughout Galatia.

So his letter starts out as a kind of love letter. “I give thanks to my God always for you.” But rather quickly, Paul addresses a problem and the letter changes tone. The people in that little congregations, surrounded by a sea of indifferent paganism which soon would become threatening – were doing something Christian people have done for 2,000 years. They were arguing. They were fighting about almost everything: about some drinking too much communion wine, eating more than their share of the potluck, about the style of their hair and head dress, and, of course, about beliefs. They were choosing up sides. Some were in Paul’s camp. Others followed Peter’s ideas. Others preferred a teacher by the name of Apollos. And, of course, the hard-livers, the true believers said they didn’t belong to anybody but Jesus. There were liberals and conservatives in Corinth, Progressives and Evangelicals, fundamentalists and they were engaging in the one activity Christian people have engaged in consistently, relentlessly, for two millennia: arguing, fighting, name calling, choosing up sides, claiming to have the whole truth and condemning anyone who had a different notion to the fires of hell.

Every time I become discouraged because of the incessant in-fighting in our Presbyterian family, I like to get out the bible and read 1 Corinthians 1, to remind myself that we’ve been fighting and arguing for 20 centuries.

I like to be reminded that in spite of our public arguments, about theology, about race, war and peace, gender, and in our time human sexuality, particularly whether or not gay and lesbian Presbyterian Christians can be ordained, or can marry, in spite of our different interpretations of scripture,

our different opinions on this and that, there is a unity, a oneness, not based on unanimity, not based on anything about us, but based on Jesus Christ, given to us by Jesus Christ.

It's what holds us together. It's what holds you together and makes you a church.

Now, anyone who reads anything knows that there is currently a lot of hand wringing about the church. Everyday, it seems, there is more evidence and new about the child abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, about the continuing membership loss in the mainline churches: United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Methodist, and, of course, Presbyterian. We have lost half of our membership in the past few decades and opinion polls show that the fastest growing religious quadrant in the population are the "nones" – no preference.

In addition, the consensus is that for better or worse, American culture has become more overtly secular than ever. I lived and worked for 26 years on Michigan Ave in Chicago that has become one of the busiest and most lucrative retail shopping streets in the world. Not all that long ago, stores opened, if at all on Sunday, around 1:00 p.m. Now, Sunday morning is no different from every morning on Michigan Ave. Church-goers used to have the sidewalks and parking garages to themselves. Now they must negotiate with package-laden shoppers from the American Girl Store, Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Nieman Marcus, and Best Buy.

Some call it the post-denominational age. Some are calling it the post-Christian age. And I sense from reading about you and talking to Daniel about you – that your experience here in the city reflects what is going on in American culture at large.

So – what is the word from God to us as we face the new reality, the new uncertainty?

Well, for one – I believe that word is relax: we have been here before. The church has faced cultural indifference, hostility and outright persecution before.

And, I believe the word is – "Keep the faith," literally – the faith that in Jesus Christ something new has happened and is happening in human history.

And, I believe the world is – remember, that this project does not rely on you and me alone. It's the church of Jesus Christ and in spite of whatever is going on in any particular time it remains his church and he will not abandon it, and, as he told his surprised disciple Peter one day, the gates of hell cannot prevail against his church.

And, I believe the word is wait and watch for new forms of church to emerge as they have done through history.

And, finally I believe the word for us, 21st century Presbyterian Christians, is to love the world with the passion and strength with which he loved the world; and to show the world who he is, the truth of him, by the love and quality of our relationships with one another.

On your birthday, as you ponder where you have been and wonder where you are going, I would remind you that nothing of love is ever lost, that the love we have for him, and for his church, is never lost but is caught up in that love – Paul promised in another letter – the love of God from which nothing, not even death can separate us.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister who is also a very distinguished author, was invited to address a New England church on its 270th birthday. Buechner's a thorough scholar and he read everything he could find about the old church he was invited to address. He discovered an amazing, delightful . In 1831 the church building was renovated and expanded with new additions. And a handsome steeple with a bell in it was built on top. Reading about the project Buechner discovered the following:

"When the steeple was added, one Tyman Woodard climbed up the ladder and in the belfry, stood on his head with his feet toward heaven."

Well, if I could do that this morning I would. But I won't. Maybe another time.

What I would say is

Relax

Keep the Faith

Remember – it is the Church of Jesus Christ

Wait and watch for what will happen next

And love, above all, do love the world God so loved. And remember that all the love for the world the Church has generated and generously given over the years is not lost, but is part of God's great plan that transcends time and space, to love and and save the world.

Love God with all your heart, mind and strength.

Love Jesus.

Love one another.

And Happy Birthday to you.

Thanks be to God.